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THE ROUND TABLE

AN EXPERIMENT WITH HOME-MADE PLAYS

In our high school, twice a year, we face the great task of putting on a very ambitious dramatic performance. In previous years, we have simplified the production as much as seemed to us compatible with bringing out the values of the plays we were using, and by doing everything ourselves we have cut the cost as low as we could and kept our literary and dramatic consciences clear. But one item has been steadily increasing in cost; that is the royalty on good modern plays. Of course we have done our share of Shakespeare and Sheridan, but occasionally we feel the desire to do something modern, and the cost of modern plays has risen with the cost of living. We have used 'The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife,' "Neighbors," "Prunella," "Fortune and Men's Eyes," and various others, paying sometimes \$50 royalty. On a bill of good modern one-act plays, the royalty can hardly be less than \$40.

This year, for the first time, we saw our way out. Our newly organized junior college was doing quite creditable work in the dramatization of short-stories and in the writing of one-act plays. It took courage to use the home-made product for so big a venture, but with chattering teeth we determined to try it. We were setting ourselves a severe test, for it is tradition that our shows must "go" with our public, and our public has come to be quite a little wider than the school and its patrons.

When Rhetoric 3 in junior college, which is open to Sophomores in their first semester, had produced six miniature plays of problematic acting value (all dramatic value is problematic until an audience has solved the problem) we called together the proud authors and the graduating class, which was to furnish the actors. Up to this time the authors had acted as a group. Now each author chose a teacher to be his guide and refuge in time of storm, and launched himself in the new rôle of producer. The authors helped to choose their own casts. Undoubtedly they would have gained more by choosing freely and as mistakenly as they sometimes did; but we have to "put over our plays," so the autocrats played a larger part here than they otherwise should.

Each play now formed a center for a new group, which progressed sometimes "socially," sometimes in a most unsocial manner when actor and author differed in the interpretation of precious lines. But if, as Mr. Dewey tells us, school is to be life, this was admirable, for we gave a few fine imitations of real stage rehearsals, except that vocabularies were restrained by the school situation. One of the battles was waged over the fine question as to whether a certain comedian was funnier when he carried a dictionary or when he appeared armed only with the author's wit.

Some authors showed a strong desire to change their most cherished lines when they heard them from the stage; some of them were so unhumanly broad-minded that they even accepted emendations from the actors; others proved to be strict constructionists and insisted on the letter and the spirit of the text. But in every case it was evident that the authors learned more from the rehearsals than they had from Clayton Hamilton, Price, and Archer combined.

New workers joined the groups, as carpenters, scene painters, make-up men, and costumers were needed.

Some of the six teachers sat back and suggested only when things were obviously going wrong, acting as a sort of safety device in the interest of the future audience. Others took a more active part.

In all cases the voice training had to be done largely by the teacher, for our auditorium is tricky. It is abnormally long and has a way of swallowing voices that has left many a professional speaker pawing the air in dumb fury as viewed and not heard from beneath the balcony. The enunciation of the actors must be unusually good and a voice that is not correctly produced is lost, no matter how hard it is forced. But all of the six teachers are trained voice producers; some of them have had the best dramatic training here and abroad, so they can do things with voices that student producers could never do.

The authors felt at first that the more scenery they had the more professional the performance would be, but a little study of the "stylization" produced by the art department converted all but one of the casts, so we were spared five sets of full professional scenery.

In the matter of footlights we were not so successful. The actors felt that they could never get the full value of their stage experience without "foots." And when, a daylight performance having been decided on in the interest of fuel and light economy, they found they were not even to have black lines under their eyes, life hardly seemed worth living. But at the evening performance, when they were properly

made up, and the footlights burned sometimes red, sometimes blue, and sometimes amber, they acted for all they were worth, and under the stimulus of laughter from people who had paid to laugh and be interested, they acted better than they knew. Half the student-body went home determined to write plays.

As an enlargement of the co-operative scheme, starting with a nucleus of six playwrights, subdividing into six groups, and taking unto themselves each a cast and a full stage crew, it was a distinct success. Everybody got more real stage training and more social training than under our usual system with plays.

I forgot to say that the authors wrote all the newspaper stories and unselfishly left themselves in the background to glorify the actors, that they arranged the plays in what they considered the psychological sequence, and that one actor and one author, who in spite of merit did not fit into the general scheme withdrew on their own motion and took over the difficult tasks of stage management and scene shifting. It was a triumph for democracy.

And the authors had been given the only genuine incentive for writing—an audience. Think how many a poor potboiler in Greenwich Village is pining away for the lack of just that thing.

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SOCIALIZATION OF THE COMPOSITION CLASS

My experience in socializing the composition class has been chiefly in the third-year *Digest* class, so called because we use the *Literary Digest* as the basis of our work. The account might be divided into preliminary step, organization, preparation, class in action, criticisms. During the first week of the fall term I announce that the *Digest* is sold to us for five cents a copy, and ask the children to find out how many of their parents are willing to have them subscribe. As fathers and mothers always consent gladly, we send in our order. After the first issue comes, and we grow somewhat acquainted with it—incidentally, the members of the class have come to know each other a little—we hold a meeting to organize.

Of course, the first step is to elect officers: a president, whose duty it is to preside at the weekly meetings; a treasurer, who receives all money, payable in advance on Monday, keeps a strict record of it,